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Learning in the shadow of the pandemic



What the Arts Teach and How It Shows (in the time of COVID-19)

Mark Selkrig, Kathryn Coleman & Abbey MacDonald

The place and role of the arts within school curriculum (and more broadly in society) has always been and remains fragile and contested (Selkrig & Bottrell, 2018). As we have re-positioned ourselves, readied our classrooms and laptops for a return to another term in stage 3 lockdown, we can again feel the weight on the arts to provide the play, wellbeing and creative space to support the anxieties and fears of students and their families across our schools. Our fragility is clearly manifested in this time of COVID-19 where, while living in a state that prides itself as the arts and cultural centre of the nation, the arts sector in Victoria closed rapidly, had a short stint at opening up and again has had to close the doors. The arts in 2020 have found themselves in dire straits, with artists and arts workers across industries continuing to wonder what the future of the arts could be like post-covid. While we have seen small glimpses of a new normal (<https://www.timeout.com/melbourne/art/art-in-melbourne-when-are-galleries-reopening-and-what-exhibitions-can-i-see>) for the arts between stage 3 first round and stage 3 second round, it is still the arts that buoy us with care and empathy (<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/>) as we head back into lockdown in metropolitan Melbourne. There is ample evidence from various parts of the world (including Australia) that highlight the value and benefits of the arts (<https://theconversation.com/the-importance-of-art-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-135225>) and arts rich learning environments for young people (<https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/articles/the-arts-in-early-childhood-learning>) before and during COVID-19. Despite this, the arts can become diminished in school settings due to competing demands on time and space.

During this health crisis, there appears to be a heightened awareness and appreciation of the arts. In this article, we return to a key thinker in the field of arts education, Elliot Eisner (2002) and a seminal work authored by him. We use his work to reflect on and consider what the arts have taught and shown us in guiding (<https://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/covid-19/artshub/digital-art-guide-to-beat-coronavirus-closures-260067>) us through times of uncertainty, while keeping us hopeful (<https://www.fya.org.au/2020/03/31/young-artists-examine-life-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>) and reinforcing why there is the necessity for the arts within the school curriculum. Throughout the article we have linked and connected to various examples of how arts learning experiences are being offered by our communities. These hyperlinks serve as resources for you to explore how the arts, arts education and artists are supporting each other such

as this Art Education Australia link: collaborative digital learning and teaching space (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-F6ROproTzuMpcW57FAGMnYCHHM-_AUbcK1k2wM4_HQ/edit).

The arts teach children to make good judgments about qualitative relationships.

It seems that art teachers have been resourceful in the ways to encourage young people to think about their home environment and the materials with which they can continue to 'make' and explore while in lockdown. In some instances 'art packs' (<https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/articles/art-education-during-the-covid-19-lockdown>) were sent home or households were encouraged to experiment with the materials they have about them, for example exploring the back yard to locate sticks, twigs and leaves as the materials to make a collage or sculptures. In the arts, rules and 'correct answers' are not definitive, and by encouraging parents and carers to ask questions of these 'at home young artists' about their work such as: 'why did you choose those particular sticks or leaves?' and 'what sort of feeling did you want to create with the sculpture or collage?', it has been possible to hear about the judgements and arguments young people have constructed and considered rather than the 'rules' they followed in making the work. A disposition we would hope to foster at a time of uncertainty.

The arts teach children that problems can have more than one solution.

This resonates for art teachers just as powerfully as it does for their students! Art teachers in Victorian schools model tremendous agility in their own practice, which students experienced last term and will again this term. From the development of resources and strategy sharing to help peers make pedagogic leaps, art teachers offered a masterclass in how to troubleshoot problems as opportunities to innovate. Artists and teachers are well accustomed to navigating the uncertainty of marginalisation; be it in curriculum agendas or meaningful recognition of the industry through investment (see Visual Communication Victoria (<https://www.vcv.asn.au/70-visual-communication-victoria/about4/56-welcome-to-visual-communication-victoria>)). Through their sharing of strategies and resources developed (<https://thebackartroom.global2.vic.edu.au/>), art teachers have shown us the many ways in which they stepped up to the COVID-19 problem.

The arts can celebrate multiple perspectives.

Teachers incorporate ways of knowing and doing integral to art as part of a holistic curriculum enactment repertoire. Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2016) remind us how, as "a multicultural country the future of Indigenous students is tied to the future of all Australians and their acceptance of the importance of Indigenous cultures" (p. 788). Art - as complexly connected in conversation with, and distinct to culture - plays a significant role as teachers must keep working to create safe spaces (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13613324.2014.969224>) for truth telling, deep listening and reconciling distorted and incomplete histories. Teachers' engagement with, recognition and inclusion of multiple perspectives continues to transform how young people take part in, obtain and benefit from Arts education. Ewing (2020) reminds us of the abundant evidence related to the critical role arts experiences play in engendering a multiplicity of distinctive skills and understandings that young people need to successfully navigate the fluidity of twenty-first century living. Drawing from their experience in and familiarity with practice, artists (<https://creative.vic.gov.au/coronavirus/creative-community>) and arts workers in Victoria

(https://docs.google.com/document/d/1u5o_1thMj_B4SeSloD2ALaM-qN1DgWSg28K4wXOx_Vs/edit?ts=5ed9bd98#ACMWithYou) were clearly already (and continue to show us just how) well accustomed they are to adopting processes of making meaning, decisions, and communication. Hashtags such as #ACMWithYou, #spreadartnotviruses (<https://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/covid-19/gina-fairley/spread-art-not-viruses-new-hashtag-gains-traction-259993>) and #NGVEveryDay (<https://www.instagram.com/p/B9yb7hFnUtY/?hl=en>) have offered a connection to celebrate the multiple perspectives and practices of the arts across Victoria in our classrooms. Inherently, these propensities saw teachers and students put multiple perspectives to work in mapping and mobilising multiple solutions for the challenges COVID-19 created for teaching, learning, and making art.

The arts teach children that in complex forms of problem-solving purposes are seldom fixed but change with circumstance and opportunity.

A range of amazing, exciting, and necessary ways in which arts teachers work with young people continues to unfold alongside the expansion and contraction of COVID-19. We know how "creative and critical practice can bring experiential learning experiences to these challenges: immersing... learners in a space of play, making, iteration and reflection, that can scaffold the process of change" (MacDonald, Wise, Riggall & Brown, 2019, p. 79). The need for art teachers to practice and teach complex forms of problem solving that Eisner (2002) describes remains pertinent. Opportunities change as COVID-19 continues in the ebb and flow of lockdowns, alongside proposed changes for higher education funding models and support packages for the Arts industry in Victoria (<https://creative.vic.gov.au/grants-and-support/programs/vicarts-grants>). Shifting circumstances and priorities are inevitably felt on the ground by teachers, where less funding for resources and opportunities can manifest in teachers feeling compelled to work doubly hard to demonstrate their worth to a resistant audience (MacDonald, Barton & Baguley, 2016). Art teachers in Victoria are navigating the tension of changing circumstances in distinctive, interconnected, and expansive ways (<https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/articles/art-education-during-the-covid-19-lockdown>).

The arts make vivid the fact that neither words in their literal form nor numbers exhaust what we can know.

The arts have well and truly stepped up in these precarious times (<https://www.aare.edu.au/blog/?p=5463>). We have seen art as a vehicle to promote young people's sense making of the current situation. We have seen a plethora of opportunities emerge (<https://www.artscentremelbourne.com.au/community/content-hub/together-with-you/families/edition-5-top-5-picks-for-families>) for young people to engage in music making, drawing, painting, animation, sculpture, movie making to capture their reflections on what matters most to them, what they have learned or hopes for the future. During the first lockdown and remote schooling we saw projects such as Together we are making history (<https://www.oursharedstory.org.au/>) appear to support the creative and critical thinking of young people, while capturing and archiving this moment in time. Our galleries such as Heide, through Heide at Home #HEIDEATHOME initiated similar support for young artists encouraging them to make and create through lego (<https://www.heide.com.au/heide-home-lego-challenge-submissions>), drawing (<https://www.heide.com.au/heide-home-drawing-challenge-submissions>) and clay (<https://www.heide.com.au/heide-home-clay-challenge-submissions>) challenges.

The arts teach students that small differences can have large effects.

We can all remember our experiences in creating that wonderful colourful painting where we just added a little too much black to our palette and everything turns to muck, or that magical moment by adding a flick of white to a colour on our paper and instantly the object becomes alive creating a glittering illusion. Similarly we all know that small difference when we are drawing and we press too hard with the pencil and we either tear the paper or make a mark that is far more pronounced than we had intended and will then impact on the whole composition. Our teaching and learning in the arts make these small differences that have lasting literacies and knowledges that are used every day. Eisner (2002) argued that a curriculum that included music, dance and art was essential in developing critical thinking skills in children to make-meaning and sense-make ideas about the world (<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/whats-on/programs-events/?type=kidsandfamilies>).

The arts teach students to think through and within a material.

Because the arts curriculum in Victoria is designed to teach students through a practitioner lens; allowing learning, teaching, and assessment to be authentic; remote, hybrid and studio-based learning was able to shift according to the site of practice. During remote teaching and learning at home, the practice focus of the curriculum was supported by young people making and responding to art with a range of non-traditional materials in their own homes. Chalk on the streets (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-02/coronavirus-covid-19-chalk-messages-on-streets-around-australia/12102778>), rainbows in windows (<https://www.bendigoadvertiser.com.au/story/6692786/heres-why-rainbows-are-appearing-in-windows/>) and bears in home entrances (<https://www.timeout.com/melbourne/news/heres-why-people-in-melbourne-are-putting-teddy-bears-in-their-front-windows-033020>) were signs of placemaking and installations by young people across Melbourne who were thinking through material, and with materials.

The arts help children learn to say what cannot be said.

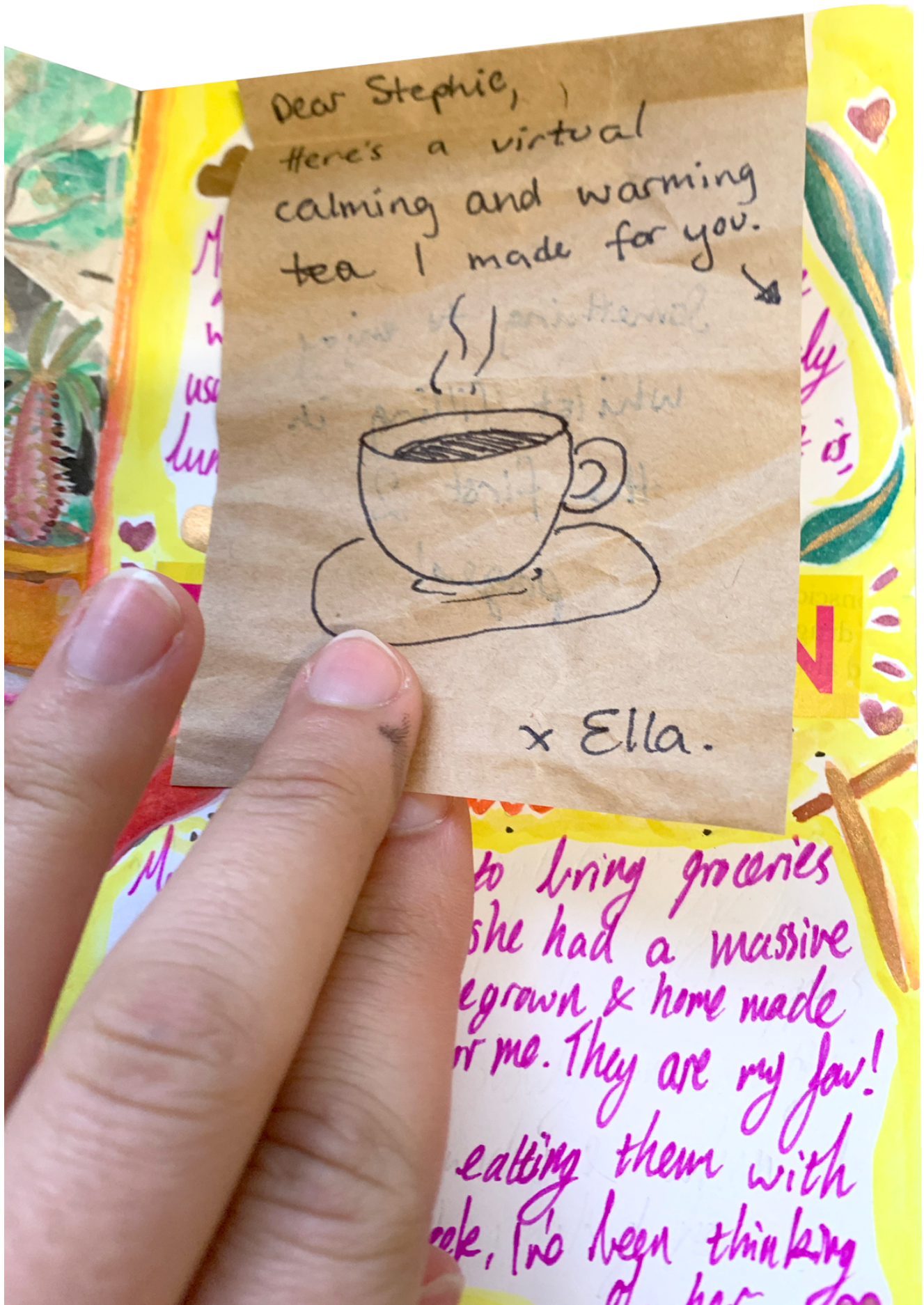
Within this COVID-19 precarity, the Victorian arts curriculum design has offered opportunities for students and teachers to show and think through their fears and anxieties, and for some the joys of being home during remote learning. The Laburnum PS Online Learn at Home Gallery (<https://www.laburnumps.vic.edu.au/page/381>) indicates how arts learning at home was critical to the wellbeing, creativity and personal expression of students as they wondered what was happening and tried to make-sense and sense-make away from school, friends and the routine of term time. Over the last six months arts teachers and students have taken risks and challenged themselves to use a variety of digital spaces they had not used before to share their feelings about the world right now. Just this year, art has been a scope to channel our emotions about bushfires, climate change, the pandemic, and fears for an unknown future. Our arts students have been making, creating, presenting, and submitting work in a range of places, platforms, and new modalities (<https://www.monash.vic.gov.au/Leisure/Arts-Culture/Isolation-Inspiration-Arts-and-Culture>). Within initial teacher education, our arts educators too were making what could only be shared via art making. The following images are the work of preservice teachers at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education who alongside their weekly online seminars and workshops, co-authored a series of pandemic zines that were sent by mail from home to home across the

semester. Anticipating the zine arriving in the mail each week was joyful, and a personal connection through art that captured their thinking and feeling about learning to be an art and design teacher from home.



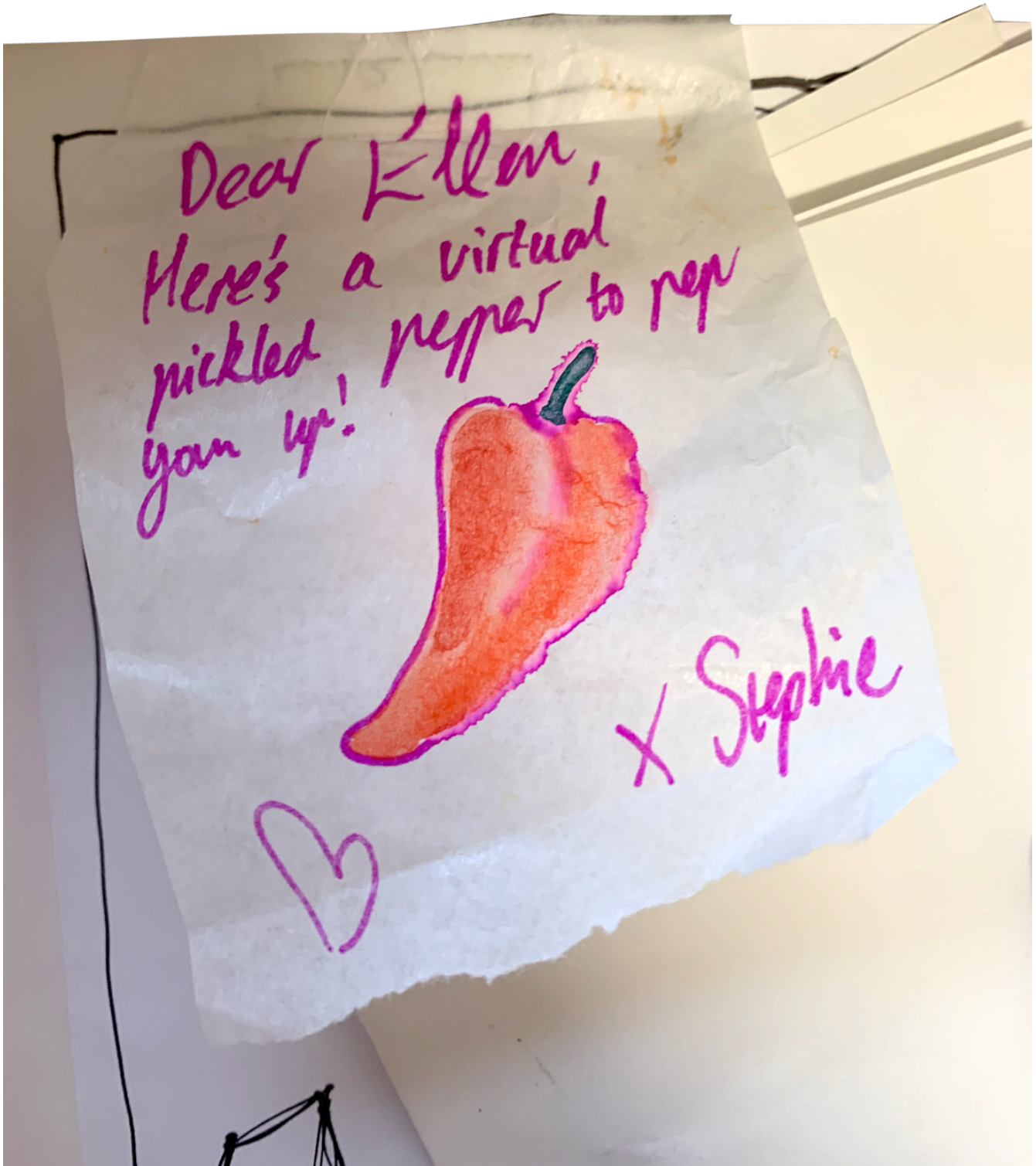
(https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/sites/default/files/Professional Voice/PV_13.2/PV-13-2-4AA.png)

Image 1: M.Teach Secondary Art & Design, MGSE Pandemic Zine by Ella Konrad-East, images by Stephanie Dimofski.



(https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/sites/default/files/Professional Voice/PV_13.2/PV-13-2-4B.png)

Image 2: M.Teach Secondary Art & Design, MGSE Ella Konrad-East's Pandemic Zine note to the next author, Stephanie Dimofski.



(https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/sites/default/files/Professional Voice/PV_13.2/PV-13-2-4C.png)

Image 3: M.Teach Secondary Art & Design, MGSE Stephanie Dimofski's Pandemic Zine note to the next author, Ellen Collins.



(https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/sites/default/files/Professional Voice/PV_13.2/PV-13-2-4D.png)

Image 4: M.Teach. Secondary Art and Design, MGSE Pandemic Zine by Felicity Young, images by Stephanie Dimofksi and Joanne Low.

The arts enable us to have experience we can have from no other source and through such experience to discover the range and variety of what we are capable of feeling.

This term is going to be a difficult one for many of us, but we know from experience that through making and responding we can wonder and wander, to be curious and imaginative (<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/kids/>) supported by our arts organisations, and to ask, *what if*. What we have learned in 2020 is that we are resilient. When the going gets tough artists, and the arts community work together to create new opportunities through possibility thinking. Our galleries and museums, theatres and performance venues have all challenged us to think differently about the role that we play in community, and to consider why the Arts are important and why the arts matter in schools.

The arts' position in the school curriculum symbolises to the young what adults believe is important.

The arts curriculum in Victoria explicitly locates the role of the artist and audience; together we learn through the practices, disciplines and traditions that have shaped cultures. We have art teachers who work with their students to develop ways of knowing through the different histories and cultures of Victoria, Australia, and the wider global community. At this current time and Post-COVID it is important that the art and education sectors (curriculum writers, professional learning providers, school principals, teachers and students of diverse race, ethnicity and cultural voice)

actively engage in dialogue about the visioning, shaping and positioning and crucial role of art in the curriculum. Our current circumstance seems to have heightened a belief that change, resilience and hope are needed in schools. We know that learning in and through the arts enables students to develop creative dispositions and expressive skills by learning about practices, materials, traditions, and cultures (Selkrig, 2018). This needs to be nurtured, supported, and reflected in curriculum so that our students can make and respond to their worlds, exploring their beliefs, values, and feelings toward global events like we find ourselves in today.

In returning to Eisner's (2002) work that champions the ways the arts benefit students, teachers, and schools to frame this article, his suite of key ideas about the importance of the arts seem to remain central, enduring and may have even more meaning now. For us, Eisner offered a pivot; a place to stop and reflect on what the arts have taught us and how the arts in the time of COVID-19 support our teaching practices and pedagogies. This year continues to unfold unlike any other we have experienced, and that you as teachers will feel the weight of providing play, wellbeing, and creative spaces to support the anxieties and fears of students and their families across our schools. Eisner maintained that the arts are not only crucial to the development of critical and creative thinking skills but they are also rigorous and sophisticated spaces of learning about the self and world. His views seem even more important now as a way of connecting our present circumstances in art education to our past, as well as our uncertain but hopeful futures.

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This article appears in Professional Voice 13.2 *Learning in the shadow of the pandemic*.

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